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## ABSTRACT

In their attempts to help educators improve student achievement, researchers have identified hundreds of effective school practices. However, there is no accurate picture of the relative effectiveness of effective practices or the ways various practices interact to produce results. Nevertheless, the data are plentiful enough to permit informed interpretation about the most beneficial schooling practices. This booklet draws on the general database of effective education practices to identify what appear to be the core contextual and instructional factors, or attributes, that enable students to learn successfully. The areas of research identified in this booklet rest on considerable research weight, are entirely or partially school controllable, and can be implemented without significant new expenditures. Fifteen effective-schooling attributes are identified here and grouped under two headings. Under the heading "Contextual Attributes" are the following: safe and orderly school environment; strong administrative leadership; primary focus on learning; maximizing learning time; monitoring student progress; academically heterogeneous class assignments; flexible in-class grouping; small class size; supportive classroom climate; parent and community involvement. Under the heading "Instructional Attributes" are the following: careful orientation to lessons; clear and focused instruction; effective questioning techniques; feedback and reinforcement; review/reteaching as needed. (Contains footnotes and 190 references.) (WFA)

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The  
Schooling  
Practices  
That  
**Matter  
Most**

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Kathleen Cotton  
Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory



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# **The Schooling Practices That Matter Most**

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## Introduction

In their attempts to help educators improve student achievement, researchers have identified and disseminated information about hundreds of “effective schooling practices” over the past 30 years. From the “effective schools” and “teacher effects” research initiated in the 1970s to the present day, this information base continues to grow. Based on this work, educators launching school improvement projects can now consult this information to increase their likelihood of success in improving student performance.

Clearly, though, schools and districts cannot undertake to implement the hundreds of new practices identified in the effective practices literature. They must make choices—choices based on locally determined goals, state standards, and other factors. Ideally, too, they should be able to identify and implement those practices that are the most critical to student success; that is, those practices which should be in place in order for all students in a school to meet their school’s objectives for them. And, indeed, some researchers, using modern statistical methods such as meta-analysis, have sought to identify which educational practices “pack the greatest punch” for raising student performance.

For the most part, however, we do not have an accurate picture of the *relative effectiveness* of “effective practices” or of the ways practices interact to produce results. Thus, for the person who asks, “what combination of schooling conditions and practices holds the greatest promise for improving student learning?” we have no scientifically provable or globally agreed-upon answer.

If that is the bad news, however, we also have the good news that there are data plentiful enough to permit informed interpretation about the most beneficial schooling practices. This paper, then, is an exercise in informed interpretation. It draws upon the general database of effective educational practices to identify what appear to be the core contextual and instructional factors that enable virtually all students to learn successfully. Along the way, I offer my reasons for selecting these particular attributes, identify where the supporting research comes from, explain why certain other “candidates” were not selected, and make some observations about how the attributes work together to benefit students’ learning.

This last point is particularly important in our current era of comprehensive school reform. The findings of the early school and teacher effects researchers were sometimes regarded as discrete entities, without sufficient attention to their interactions or to their effects over time. Many who wanted to improve their schools generated checklists of desirable practices based on the findings and sought to implement them in a parallel but not necessarily integrated way.

Today, educators and researchers recognize that genuine and lasting school improvement is unlikely to be achieved in this manner. Experience with school reform efforts, the development and use of more sophisticated research designs,

and a growing understanding that the *school* is the most meaningful unit of analysis, have led to a more holistic view of what it takes to raise student performance. “Effective practices” cannot be maximally effective without *schoolwide* buy-in and support, and because practices interact, they can affect one another’s impact. For example, a sustained, schoolwide focus on the importance of learning facilitates teachers’ use of proven instructional practices in the classroom. Or, to take a negative example, if too much potential instructional time is lost to student misbehavior, “housekeeping” matters, loudspeaker announcements, and so on, the beneficial effects of small class size cannot be realized.

We also know that effects can compound over time. To take the class size example again, research shows that children educated in small classes in the primary grades continue to outperform their counterparts from larger primary classes when they all move into the intermediate grades (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Findings on student retention indicate that having to repeat third grade increases the likelihood that a student will drop out of high school (Woods, 1995). One could cite many other examples, the main point being that implementing effective practices in an integrated, sustained, schoolwide fashion holds much greater potential than a piecemeal approach. It is with this in mind that the following discussion is offered.

Turning to the research support for the assertions made here, it is important to recognize that it could—and in some other contexts *does*—encompass scores of pages.<sup>1</sup> To keep things to a manageable size here, I have chosen a dozen or so key support pieces for each contextual and instructional attribute I discuss. These include both studies and reviews, classic and less-well-known reports, as well as older and more recent research. I have taken this approach in order to provide a sense of what the research base underlying each variable is like and, I trust, to represent it fairly.

The effective schooling attributes I have identified as most crucial are as follows:

#### **Contextual Attributes**

- Safe and orderly school environment
- Strong administrative leadership
- Primary focus on learning
- Maximizing learning time
- Monitoring student progress
- Academically heterogeneous class assignments
- Flexible in-class grouping
- Small class size
- Supportive classroom climate
- Parent and community involvement

#### **Instructional Attributes**

- Careful orientation to lessons
- Clear and focused instruction
- Effective questioning techniques
- Feedback and reinforcement
- Review/reteaching as needed

<sup>1</sup> See Kathleen Cotton, *Research You Can Use to Improve Results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1999.

To those familiar with the classic school and teacher effects research, these lists will provide few surprises. The early work of school effects researchers such as Brookover and Lezotte (1979) and Edmonds (1979), for example, identified factors such as strong administrative leadership and a schoolwide focus on learning among the attributes differentiating high-achieving schools from those schools with similar demographic profiles that evidenced lower achievement. And subsequent research has underscored the importance of these characteristics. The list of instruction-related practices, too, includes key attributes as identified in the classic work of teacher effects researchers such as Rosenshine (1976) and Brophy (1979). In fact, it is probably safe to say that the effective schooling findings first identified as essential by these researchers would still make the cut when evaluated in light of the research conducted in the years since. Rather than overturning earlier research, subsequent investigations have validated and added refinements to its findings, as well as focusing on areas not addressed in that earlier research.

Before looking in detail at what are termed here the critical attributes for high-performing schools, it may be helpful to make some general observations about these characteristics. First, I do not claim that they all need to be present in order for any given student to learn well. Many students come from families able to provide them sufficient experiences, materials, and support that the absence of some of these factors would not have too deleterious an effect on their school performance. Others have considerable native academic ability and can perform well in less-than-ideal circumstances. But if we are talking about educating *all* students to high standards, I would argue that all of these characteristics should be present.

Second, there are factors which bear a strong relationship to student performance that are not included here, because educators can affect them only minimally (e.g., school size) or not at all (e.g., socioeconomic status, parents' educational attainment).

Third, a word about school-controllable factors and practices that are not represented here. What about substance abuse prevention programs? Linkages between the school and health and social service agencies? Efforts to increase equity? Surely, one might argue, these are important, too. I agree, and I am well aware that my choices are assailable. I excluded these particular factors because their distance from student performance makes their impact more difficult to research, and, consequently, there is not, in my judgment, the breadth and depth of research support for them that exists for those I have selected. At the same time, I am certain there are other good candidates, and I expect disagreement. I would ask readers to hold this matter in abeyance as I describe my choices.

Fourth, as one reviewer of this paper encouraged me to make explicit, the attributes identified here relate to addressing the needs of *students*. Closely related to these elements are "a host of ... climate and capacity issues which focus on the environment for adults" (J. Bamburg, personal communication, June 12, 1999).

These, in turn, are influenced by district- and state-level policymakers. While these topics are beyond the scope of this paper, it is certainly true that a comprehensive picture of “effective practices” would need to include professional development, broadly representative decisionmaking procedures, collaboration, and other functions that bear on a school staff’s ability to provide high-quality learning environments and instruction.

Fifth, items on the two lists differ in breadth, with the instructional elements being relatively narrow and specific, and the contextual factors being described more accurately as amalgams rather than as discrete practices. While there can be drawbacks to clustering unlike things, I have chosen to do so for two reasons: The research on which this paper is based routinely deals with these disparate components in the same breath, and the terms used in the list are those that are most familiar to educational researchers and practitioners alike. For clarification, however, I do discuss what each attribute consists of, citing the research in support of the parts as well as the whole.

Finally, the elements under discussion here have to do primarily with structure and method; and while I contend that they are critical components of educational success, they do not, in and of themselves, guarantee it. Presenting them here as keys to desirable schooling outcomes assumes that the educational goals they support are worthy and that the curriculum to which they are connected is of high quality. Setting trivial learning goals or imparting only superficial learning content will produce inferior results, no matter what else might be going on. Thus, implicit in discussions of elements such as “a primary focus on learning” and “clear and focused instruction” is the supposition that what is taught is worth knowing in the first place, and that it is treated in sufficient depth to engage students’ interest and offer them a challenge.

# Contextual Attributes



## **Safe and Orderly School Environment**

The largely correlational effective schools research and the observational research on classroom management and discipline both point to the importance of a safe and orderly environment for student learning. This makes intuitive sense and is borne out by scores of research studies conducted over many years (Cotton, 1999).

At the school level, researchers, once they have noted a relationship to student achievement, commonly go on to identify typical qualities of a safe and orderly environment.<sup>2</sup> These include:

1. A visible and supportive principal<sup>3</sup>
2. Broad-based agreement about standards for student behavior
3. High behavioral expectations that are clearly communicated to students
4. Input from students, especially older ones, into behavior policies
5. Consistent application of rules from day to day and from student to student
6. A warm school climate whose signature feature is a concern for students as individuals
7. Delegation of disciplinary authority to teachers
8. For seriously disruptive students, in-school suspensions accompanied by support

Gaddy (1988) notes that “order as a product of coercion [and] order as a manifestation of self-discipline” (496) may look much the same to the casual observer. The above list of characteristics is therefore useful, because it helps to conceptualize order as the product of humanistic treatment of students—not merely quiet hallways at any price. As Edmonds (1979) noted in his analysis of schools that educate poor children effectively, “The school’s atmosphere is or-

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<sup>2</sup> Findings about safe and orderly environments at the schoolwide level are from the work of Cotton (1990); Duke (1989); Freiberg, Prokosch, & Treister (1989); Gaddy (1988); Lasley & Wayson (1982); Levine & Lezotte (1990); Short (1988); Wang, Haertel, & Walberg (1995); and Wayson & Lasley (1984).

<sup>3</sup> The numbering of listed items is for easy reference only and does not imply chronology or relative importance.

derly without being rigid, quiet without being oppressive, and generally conducive to the instructional business at hand" (22).

Immense research weight also supports certain classroom management and discipline practices as productive of safe and orderly classrooms and conducive to desirable student achievement.<sup>4</sup> These include:

1. Classroom rules and procedures that are specific and clearly explained at the beginning of the school year and periodically reinforced thereafter, especially with children in grades K-3
2. Beginning classes quickly and purposefully, with assignments, activities, materials and supplies ready for students when they arrive
3. Teachers circulating around the room during seatwork activities, keeping students on task and providing help as needed
4. Standards that are consistent or identical with the building code of conduct and that are applied consistently and equitably
5. Involvement of older children in establishing classroom standards and sanctions
6. Teaching and reinforcing positive, prosocial behaviors and skills, especially with students who have a history of behavior problems
7. Stopping disruptions quickly, taking care to avoid disrupting the entire class
8. Focusing on students' inappropriate behavior when taking disciplinary action—not on their personalities or histories

These practices obviously complement those associated with safe and orderly school-level environments and, as we shall see, interact and even converge with other key variables, such as supportive classroom environments, maximum learning time, and monitoring student progress.

<sup>4</sup> Key resources supporting these classroom-level practices include Anderson, Evertson, & Emmer (1980); Brophy & Good (1986); Cotton (1990); Doyle (1986); Emmer & Evertson (1981); Evertson & Harris (1992); Fraser (1998); Gettinger (1988); Heins (1996); Johns & Espinoza (1996); and Solomon, et al. (1988).

## Strong Administrative Leadership

Schools with desirable levels of student achievement are consistently shown by research to have “strong administrative leadership.” The principal’s visibility/accessibility identified as a key feature of safe and orderly school environments is also identified by researchers as a typical characteristic of strong, effective leaders. Other general findings about the leadership characteristics positively related to student performance include:<sup>5</sup>

1. Holding and communicating a clear vision of the school’s educational purposes and standards—both within the school and with parents and other community members
2. Monitoring teacher and student performance and rewarding good work
3. Sharing decision-making responsibility with teachers
4. Assuring that student performance data are used in developing improvement plans
5. Providing resources for staff development

Not surprisingly, many of the aspects of strong administrative leadership have to do with the principal’s involvement with the instructional program. Whereas less successful leaders often attend chiefly or exclusively to the noninstructional aspects of school management, effective administrators are involved with student learning in the following ways:

1. They believe that all students can learn and that the school makes the difference between success and failure.
2. They know and can apply validated teaching and learning principles; they model effective teaching practices for staff as appropriate.
3. They are familiar with research on effective instruction, share it, and assure that it is reflected in instructional planning and delivery.
4. They earmark resources for the professional development of those who develop curriculum and provide instruction, and they take part in professional development activities.

<sup>5</sup> Key findings on administrator characteristics positively related to student achievement come from Andrews & Soder (1987); Bamburg & Andrews (1991); Brookover & Lezotte (1979); De Bevoise (1984); Edmonds (1979); Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis (1996); Hallinger & Heck (1996); High & Achilles (1986); Leithwood & Montgomery (1985); and Walberg & Lane (1985).

5. They work with other staff to assure that the school's curriculum, instruction, and assessment are aligned.
6. They communicate the expectation that instructional programs will improve over time and routinely monitor the implementation of new practices.

As with many other effective practices, the presence of these management- and instruction-related functions has an even more positive effect on the achievement of minority and low-SES students than on that of students in general.



As key researchers such as Walberg and Lane (1985), Hallinger, Bickman, and Davis (1996), and Hallinger and Heck (1996) point out, the fact that these powerful administrator activities have an indirect effect on student performance in no way diminishes their importance. Their mediated effects are appropriate, for as Hallinger, Bickman, and Davis point out, "achieving results through others is the essence of managerial work" (545).

Finally, it is important to note that research has identified no single best approach or style for carrying out these leadership functions, and that administrators need not exhibit all of them in order to be effective in fostering high student performance.

**Primary  
Focus on  
Learning**

Strong leaders exhibit both a sustained focus on learning and the capacity for engaging others in doing so. And more than 20 years of school effectiveness research routinely identifies the presence or absence of a fundamental focus on learning as critical in determining effectiveness. The ways in which such a focus is expressed in effective schools include the following:<sup>6</sup>

1. Frequent emphasis at all-school gatherings and in classrooms that learning is the most important purpose of being in school

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<sup>6</sup> Some key resources in which these are identified include Andrews & Soder (1987); Bamburg & Andrews (1991); Beck & Murphy (1996); Brookover & Lezotte (1979); Brophy (1997); Edmonds (1979); Good & Brophy (1986); Purkey & Smith (1983); Sammons, Hillman, & Mortimore (1995); and Zigarelli (1996).

2. Schoolwide and classroom communication to students that staff hold high expectations for their achievement and believe in their ability to learn successfully
3. Staff time and attention devoted to the accomplishment of basic reading and mathematics objectives by all students
4. Staff assumption of responsibility for students' learning
5. The presence and visibility of mission statements, slogans, mottoes, and displays that emphasize the school's academic goals
6. Evaluation of all proposals for change in terms of their potential for enhancing student learning
7. A "norm of improvement"—a shared belief in continuous effort to improve the instructional program

In addition, it is easy to see that maximizing learning time and close monitoring of student progress—critical practices in their own right—are logical manifestations of a primary focus on student learning.

### **Maximizing Learning Time**

Researchers tell us that schools differ enormously in how much time their students spend engaged in appropriately challenging learning activities (Honzy, 1986-87; Karweit, 1984). First, schools differ in the amount of time they allocate to classroom learning activities. Second, teachers differ in both their subject matter time allotments and in the amounts of potential learning time that are lost to procedural and disciplinary matters, transitions, dead time, or off-task activities. Third, even a student who is engaged in a learning task may be making his way through drill-and-practice worksheets that are too easy for him, rather than experiencing true "academic learning time"—time spent engaging in tasks at an appropriate level of difficulty.

Practices aimed at maximizing learning time intersect with several other effective schooling attributes. Maintaining a safe and orderly environment is obviously essential for students to spend their time learning, for example, and protecting learning time is a commonly observed practice of effective administrators. And one way of viewing the critical instruc-

tional practices identified is that they make the best use of the learning time available. The following practices contribute to maximizing learning time:<sup>7</sup>

At the schoolwide level:

1. Allocating time for various subjects based on school and district goals and utilizing alternative scheduling practices (e.g., block scheduling) to ensure adequate time allocations for core subjects
2. Establishing and enforcing policies regarding tardies, absenteeism, and appropriate classroom behavior
3. Providing learning time and help outside of regular schools hours for students who need it
4. Reviewing potential new programs and activities in terms of their likely impact on learning time
5. Keeping loudspeaker announcements and other administrative intrusions brief
6. Ensuring that the school day, classes, and other activities start and end on time
7. Holding inservice activities as needed to improve staff skills in managing classrooms and increasing student time-on-task

In the classroom:

1. Beginning and ending lessons on time and keeping transition times short
2. Setting and maintaining a brisk instructional pace, keeping digressions to a minimum
3. Presenting learning activities at an appropriate level of difficulty for the majority of students, making adaptations to serve the needs of faster and slower learners
4. Maintaining awareness of the rest of the class when working with individuals and small groups

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<sup>7</sup> Identified in Anderson (1981); Brophy (1986b); Canady & Rettig (1995); Cotton (1989b); Fisher & Berliner (1985); Fisher, et al. (1980); Hossler, Stage, & Gallagher (1988); Karweit (1984); Levine & Lezotte (1995); Martens & Kelly (1993); Orchard (1996); and Stallings (1980).

5. Keeping seatwork activities productive through active supervision and provision of assistance to students in a way that others are not disturbed
6. Working with slower learners to reduce the amount of time needed for learning, e.g., by teaching them validated study skills and learning strategies
7. Assigning homework to elementary students above grade 3, with longer (45- to 120-minute) assignments to secondary students

**Monitoring  
Student  
Progress**

Scheduling and other time-related decisions are made partly on the basis of students' needs, and those needs, in turn, are determined through monitoring their learning progress. The kinds of monitoring efforts that characterize effective schools and classrooms include the following:<sup>8</sup>

1. Collecting and reviewing student performance data to ensure early identification and support for students with learning difficulties
2. Establishing and using procedures for collecting, summarizing, and reporting student achievement information; using aggregated data to determine overall performance and trends; and disaggregating data to review the performance of specific student groups
3. Reviewing test results, grade reports, attendance records, and other materials to identify problems and taking action based on findings
4. Reviewing assessment instruments and methods for their suitability to the students being evaluated, and making changes as needed, e.g., for students whose native language is not English
5. Making summaries of student performance available to all staff for their use in planning; making periodic reports to parents and community members
6. Using assessment methods beyond standardized achievement tests (e.g., performance assessments, portfolios) to enrich their understanding of students' progress

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<sup>8</sup> See Block & Burns (1976); Blum & Butler (1985); Brophy & Good (1986); Cawelti (1987); Cohen (1987); Edmonds & Frederiksen (1979); Guskey (1994); Herman (1992); Krug (1992); Levine & Lezotte (1995); O'Conner (1995); Porter & Brophy (1988); and Walberg, Paschal, & Weinstein (1985).

7. Aligning classroom assessments of student performance with the written curriculum and actual instruction
8. Routinely checking students' understanding by conducting recitations, checking students' work during seatwork periods, assigning and checking homework, administering quizzes, and reviewing student performance data

### **Academically Heterogeneous Class Assignments**

Whether to assign students to classes on the basis of test scores and past academic performance (tracking) or to assign them either randomly or in deliberately heterogeneous arrangements is a controversial matter (Oakes, et al., 1997; Loveless, 1998; Grossen, 1996)—and one that I will not attempt to analyze in this short paper. Suffice it to say that the controversy has less to do with the achievement benefits of different arrangements than with political and logistical issues. One of these is “the deeply held beliefs of colleagues, parents, and students about intelligence and privilege that legitimize tracking, especially in racially and socioeconomically mixed schools” (Oakes, et al., 1997, 482). Consult the article by Oakes and others as well as Donelan, Neal, and Jones (1994) for recent discussions of this controversy.

Another reason behind resistance to heterogeneous grouping is that implementing and managing cooperative and other kinds of student work groups in heterogeneous settings is very challenging for teachers (Levine and Levine, 1999a, 3). Many teachers have not had the opportunity to develop the skills for orchestrating such groups, so success is likely to depend on providing them with assistance.

From a research perspective, recognizing and counteracting resistance to heterogeneous grouping is well worth the effort: Research supports both heterogeneous class assignments and part-time homogeneous grouping as one component of a flexible in-class grouping strategy. And, like other effective practices, these practices benefit ethnic/racial minority students and low-SES students even more than they benefit students in general.

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Looking first at between-class academic tracking,<sup>9</sup> most research tells us that while there may be some academic benefit for extremely high-performing students placed in homogeneous tracks (Kulik, 1993), most students experience no academic benefit from this arrangement, and students classified as middle or low ability suffer in terms of their self-esteem, learning motivation, and general school satisfaction. Since poor and minority students are overrepresented in low-ability tracks and special education placements, and since most schools continue to be tracked despite the findings from research, it is no wonder that tracking continues to be a serious social as well as educational issue.

### **Flexible In-Class Grouping**

Turning to the subject of in-class grouping, researchers have identified many practices that can be effective—practices that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. These include:<sup>10</sup>

1. Using whole group instruction when introducing new concepts and skills
2. Forming smaller, short-term groups as needed to reinforce learning and address individual achievement levels
3. Reviewing and adjusting groups often, moving students as achievement levels change, avoiding underplacement, and involving other teachers and aides in making placement decisions wherever possible
4. Providing in-class instruction in small groups for low achievers, avoiding pull-out classes whenever possible
5. Delivering high-quality instruction to students in lower-ability groups—varied learning materials and activities, enthusiastic teacher behavior, opportunities to respond to higher-order questions, etc.
6. Using heterogeneous cooperative learning groups for some learning activities

<sup>9</sup> Research sources regarding between-class academic tracking include Donelan, Neal, & Jones (1994); Fuligni, Eccles, & Barber (1995); Gamoran (1992); Kulik (1993); Noland & Taylor (1986); Oakes (1985); Oakes, et al. (1997); Schneider (1989); and Slavin (1987b, 1988a).

<sup>10</sup> These are identified in the work of Brandt & Ellsworth (1996); Calfee & Brown (1979); Davidson (1985); Johnson, Johnson, & Scott (1978); Johnson, et al. (1981); Lazarowitz, et al. (1988); Lou, Abrami, & Spence (1996); McManus & Gettinger (1996); Peterson, Wilkinson, & Hallinan (1984); Slavin (1995, 1988a, 1987a, 1996); and Slavin & Karweit (1985).

7. Composing cooperative learning groups that represent not only different ability levels, but also both genders, different ethnic/racial backgrounds and socioeconomic strata, etc., since research shows that learning in such arrangements enhances intergroup relations
8. Structuring cooperative learning groups so that there are both group rewards and individual accountability
9. Making use of peer tutoring and peer evaluation groups to provide students feedback and support on their work
10. Holding inservice activities to refine teachers' and aides' skills in managing cooperative and other small learning groups



To elaborate on this last point, real-life examples of assistance to staff include providing a roving facilitator to assist classroom teachers, providing qualified staff in addition to classroom teachers so that learning groups for lower-performing students can be kept small, and supplying teachers with specific guidelines and procedures for student assessment and implementation of learning groups (Levine and Levine, 1999b, 6).

Practices identified in this section interact with several other critical effective schooling components. Small group work and tutoring maximize learning time, for example, and frequent review of group composition is one way that teachers and aides monitor their students' progress. In addition, the social benefits of heterogeneous cooperative group learning contribute to a positive classroom climate.

**Small Class Size** Because operating small classes is more expensive than running large ones, the prospect of reducing class size is a perennially controversial topic. Research findings about the benefits of smaller classes for young children indicate, however, that reducing their size would be well worth the extra costs involved. Some major findings include:<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> These are drawn from the work of Achilles (1997); Bingham (1994); Bourke (1986); Finn (1998); Glass & Smith (1978); Hanushek (1998); Illig (1997); Kramer (1997); Mosteller (1995); Polansky & Johnson (1996); Robinson (1990); Robinson & Wittebols (1986); U.S. Department of Education (1998); and Wenglinsky (1997, 1998).

1. Smaller classes significantly promote achievement in grades K-3, and the effects are greater for minority and poor children than for children in general.
2. These effects occur when class size is reduced to between 15 and 20 students.
3. When class sizes are reduced from significantly more than 20 students to fewer than 20, average students gain approximately 10 percentile points; poor and minority students gain more.
4. While reducing class size does not guarantee that teachers will use more effective schooling practices, teachers of smaller classes do tend to use more of these practices, e.g., a greater variety of instructional techniques and more individual attention to students.
5. K-3 students in smaller classes exhibit more positive attitudes and classroom behavior than those in larger classes.
6. Fewer children educated in smaller classes in grades K-3 are retained in grade.
7. Children educated in smaller classes in grades K-3 continue to outperform their counterparts from larger classes after the two groups move into the higher grades.
8. The achievement benefits of smaller classes are significantly less for children above grade 3, but smaller classes improve the quality of the classroom environment for these students.
9. For students performing below grade level in classes in which they predominate, research supports the combined use of individual tutoring and placement in classes no larger than 15 students.
10. Class size is not pupil/teacher ratio; that is, the presence of a teacher and an aide in a class of approximately 30 students does not typically produce the positive results we see in a class with 15 students and one teacher.



While the act of reducing class size may produce some benefits in and of itself, it has far greater potential to do so when combined with other effective practices. In particular, smaller classes are associated with more positive classroom environ-

ment and increase students' involvement with the critical instructional practices described further along in this discussion.

### **Supportive Classroom Climate**

Few would argue that a harsh or critical classroom environment is preferable to a supportive one in helping students to learn successfully. And as it so often does, research validates our common sense notion. Yet research also shows that teachers' behavior can sometimes feel disobligeing to students without the teachers' knowing it or intending to produce that effect. In particular, research shows that students are very sensitive to teachers' attitudes and expectations as expressed in verbal and nonverbal ways—so much so that some students exhibit achievement and attitudes congruent with what they believe their teachers think of them and their abilities (Brophy, 1982; Bamburg, 1994).

Given the influence on student performance of teacher behavior and other variables, teachers are encouraged to make use of practices research has identified as productive of a supportive classroom climate. They include, first of all, those classroom-level practices that contribute to a safe and orderly environment (see p. 6). Others are:<sup>12</sup>

1. Communicating high expectations for student performance; letting students know that they are all believed capable of meeting basic objectives, and no one is expected to fail
2. Holding students accountable for completing assignments, turning in work, and participating in classroom discussions
3. Providing the time, instruction, and encouragement necessary to help lower achievers perform at acceptable levels; this includes giving them learning material and activities as interesting and varied as those provided for other students

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<sup>12</sup> Found in Agne, Greenwood, & Miller (1994); Angell (1991); Bamburg (1994); Brophy (1982); Cotton (1989c); Deiro (1997); Edmonds (1979); Evertson & Harris (1992); Fraser (1998); Galbo (1992); Good (1987); Gottfredson, Marciniak, & Birdseye (1995); Harwood (1992); Lloyd (1995); Pierce (1994); and Voelkl (1995).

4. Monitoring their own beliefs and behavior to make certain that high expectations are communicated to all students regardless of socioeconomic status, race, gender, or other personal characteristics
5. Avoiding unreliable sources of information about students' learning potential, such as single test scores or the biases of other teachers
6. Emphasizing that different students are good at different things and reinforcing this by having them view each other's products and performances
7. Paying attention to students' interests, problems, and accomplishments
8. Encouraging effort, focusing on the positive aspects of students' answers, products, and behavior
9. Communicating interest and caring to students, both verbally and through such nonverbal means as giving undivided attention, maintaining eye contact, smiling, and nodding
10. Sharing anecdotes and incidents from their personal experience and using humor as appropriate to built rapport with students
11. Recognizing students for achievement and improvement in academics and behavior
12. Using cooperative learning groups to enhance learning and improve intergroup relations
13. Exhibiting democratic leadership and encouraging students to express and defend their views on significant issues

While important at all times, a supportive classroom environment becomes especially critical when working with students to develop higher-order thinking skills. Developing such skills requires students to move out of their "comfort zone"—something they will be reluctant to do unless they feel safe to try out new ways of working with ideas and information. Teachers' communication of high expectations, warmth, and encouragement complements all other contextual variables and instructional practices.

## Parent and Community Involvement

The active involvement of parents in their children's learning is obviously something over which the school has limited influence. Still, because parent involvement makes an enormous positive difference in children's school performance, I include the following validated practices for engaging and working with parents and community members:<sup>13</sup>

1. Conducting vigorous outreach activities, especially in culturally diverse school settings, to involve parent and community representatives from all cultural groups in the community
2. Developing written policies which acknowledge the importance of parent/community involvement and providing ongoing support to parent involvement efforts
3. Making special efforts to involve the parents of economically disadvantaged, racial/ethnic minority, and language minority students, who tend to be underrepresented among parents involved in the schools
4. Working with cultural minority parents and community members to help children cope with any differences in norms noted between the home and the school
5. Communicating repeatedly to parents that their involvement can greatly enhance their children's school performance, regardless of the parents' own level of education
6. Making parents of young children aware that the earlier they become involved in their child's education, the more it benefits his or her learning
7. Communicating to parents that students *of all ages* benefit from parent involvement
8. Encouraging parents of young children to read to them, every day if possible, and for at least 10 minutes at a time
9. Sending home to parents information about upcoming classroom activities, examples of students' work, and suggestions for at-home learning activities

<sup>13</sup> Identified in Becher (1984); Cotton & Wiklund (1989); Griffith (1996); Henderson (1987); Henderson & Berla (1994); Keith, et al. (1996); Levine & Lezotte (1995); Paulson (1994); Sanders (1996); Sattes (1985); Tangri & Moles (1987); Watson, Brown, & Swick (1983); Williams & Chavkin (1989); and Yap & Enoki (1995).

10. Offering parents different parent involvement options to choose from, based on their schedules and interests, e.g., helping their children learn at home, helping out in the classroom, providing transportation for field trips, etc.
11. Involving community members in schoolwide and classroom activities, giving presentations, serving as information resources, serving as reader/responders for students' published writings, etc.
12. Encouraging parents to provide a suitable place with necessary materials for children to study at home and to monitor the homework habits of children at least through the elementary grades
13. Being mindful that parents are busy people with limited time, and refraining from asking them to devote unrealistic amounts of time to school-related activities
14. Publishing indicators of school quality and providing them to parents and community members periodically to foster communication and stimulate public action



# Instructional Attributes



As noted earlier, the instructional attributes most closely and positively related to student performance differ from the contextual attributes, in that they are much more specific. Their potency derives from being used in combination—so much so that it is somewhat artificial to treat them discretely. The following sections identify the component parts of each of five instructional practices: careful orientation to lessons, clear and focused instruction, effective questioning techniques, feedback and reinforcement, review and reteaching as needed. This brief treatment, while it cannot do justice to the complexity of instructing children effectively, does call attention to key instructional behaviors repeatedly noted by researchers.

### **Careful Orientation to Lessons**

Researchers<sup>14</sup> find that effective teachers typically enhance the learning readiness of their students in the following ways:

1. Helping students get ready to learn by explaining lesson objectives in everyday language and referring to them periodically during the lesson to maintain focus
2. Posting or handing out learning objectives to help students keep a sense of direction and checking periodically to assure that students understand them
3. Explaining the relationship of the current lesson to previous learning, calling attention to key concepts or skills previously covered
4. Arousing students' interest and curiosity about the lesson content by relating it to things of personal relevance to them
5. Challenging and inspiring students to learn, particularly at the start of difficult lessons, and making sure they know what is expected and are ready to learn
6. Using strategies such as advance organizers, study questions, and prediction to prepare students for learning activities
7. Explaining to students that they are expected to contribute to classroom discussions and other participatory activities



<sup>14</sup> Findings are identified in Block & Burns (1976); Brophy (1987); Brophy & Good (1986); Ellis & Worthington (1994); Good & Grouws (1979); Porter & Brophy (1988); Rosenshine (1986, 1995); Slavin (1994); Stahl & Clark (1987); and Stallings (1985).

## **Clear and Focused Instruction**

Researchers<sup>15</sup> report that, having set the stage by means of these orientation practices, effective teachers carry out the following kinds of activities:

1. Reviewing lesson activities, giving clear written and verbal directions, emphasizing key points, and checking students' understanding
2. Giving lectures in plain language, augmenting them with demonstrations or diagrams as appropriate
3. Taking note of students' strengths and, when feasible, offering learning activities that capitalize on those strengths
4. Giving students plenty of opportunity for guided and independent practice with new concepts and skills
5. Instructing students in strategies for learning and for remembering/applying what they have learned—note taking, mnemonics, cognitive mapping, study skills, test-taking skills, etc.

## **Effective Questioning Techniques**

I have not usually seen the matter of effective classroom questioning receive attention as a key instructional attribute, but I believe its importance warrants doing so. For one thing, researchers tell us that recitation—a major form of questioning—is second only to lecturing in popularity as a teaching method and typically consumes anywhere from 35 to 50 percent of classroom instructional time. For another, research identifies a close relationship between effective classroom questioning and student test performance. Finally, as assessment experts routinely remind us, good instruction includes assessment components, and vice versa; and teachers' classroom questioning is a common intersection of these functions.

Elements of effective teacher questioning include the following:<sup>16</sup>

1. Asking questions that engage student interaction and enable them to monitor student understanding

<sup>15</sup> Brophy (1979); Brophy & Good (1986); Corno & Snow (1986); Fraenkel (1995); Haller, Child, & Walberg (1988); Madden, et al. (1993); Metcalf & Cruickshank (1991); Rosenshine (1976); Rosenshine & Stevens (1986); Slavin (1994); Snyder, et al. (1991); and Weade & Evertson (1988).

<sup>16</sup> These elements are identified in Atwood & Wilen (1991); Barnette, et al. (1995); Brophy (1986b); Cotton (1989a); Gall (1984); Johnston, Markle, & Haley-Oliphant (1987); Makin (1996); Mansfield (1996); Rosenshine (1995); Swift & Gooding (1983); and Tobin (1987).

2. Structuring questions so as to focus students' attention on key elements in the lesson
3. Posing questions at the beginning of lessons or reading assignments for students to consider as they read or listen to new material
4. Asking a combination of lower-cognitive (fact and recall) and higher-cognitive (open-ended and interpretive) questions to check students' understanding and stimulate their thinking
5. Asking lower-cognitive questions that most students will be able to answer correctly when helping students to acquire and reinforce factual knowledge
6. Asking a majority of higher-cognitive questions of students above the primary grades during classroom discussions
7. Allowing generous amounts of "wait-time" when questioning students—at least three seconds for lower-cognitive questions and more for higher-cognitive ones
8. Using strategies such as probing, redirection, and reinforcement with students whose initial responses are inaccurate or incomplete, thereby improving their understanding and communicating confidence in their ability to work through complex issues
9. Assuring that both faster and slower learners have opportunities to respond to higher-cognitive questions and are given sufficient wait-time

**Feedback and Reinforcement** Some investigations have found instructional reinforcement to have the most powerful positive effect on student achievement of all indicators of instructional quality (Walberg, 1984). And research in general<sup>17</sup> supports the practice of letting students know how they are doing and corroborating their accurate responses—in classroom recitations, on homework assignments, as part of instructional software programs, and so forth. Frequently cited practices include:

<sup>17</sup> Representative research on the effects of feedback and reinforcement includes Azevedo & Bernard (1995); Brophy & Good (1986); Butler & Nisan (1986); DiPardo & Freedman (1988); Kulik & Kulik (1991, 1988); Leach & Byrne (1986); Lysakowski & Walberg (1981); McCarthy, Webb, & Hancock (1995); Rosenshine & Stevens (1986); Schunk (1984); and Walberg (1984).

1. Giving students immediate feedback on their in-class responses and written assignments to help them understand and correct errors
2. Acknowledging correct responses as such during recitations and on assignments and tests
3. Relating the feedback they provide to unit goals or overall course goals
4. Giving praise and other verbal reinforcements for correct answers and for progress in relation to past performance; however, effective praise is that which is used sparingly and neither randomly nor when unmerited
5. Making use of peer evaluation techniques (e.g., for written composition assignments) as a means of providing feedback and guidance for students
6. Providing computer-assisted instructional activities that give students feedback and reinforcement regarding their learning performance
7. Assigning homework regularly to students in grade four and above, and see that it is corrected and returned promptly—either in class by the students or by the teacher (Researchers find that students respond better to such feedback if day-to-day homework is not graded.)
8. Training students to provide each other feedback and reinforcement during peer tutoring activities

### **Review/ Reteaching as Needed**

Finally, researchers have identified review of learning material as an instructional practice benefiting all students, and reteaching as critically important for those who require more time and exposure in order to master learning material.<sup>18</sup>

Validated approaches for review and reteaching include:

1. Reviewing/reteaching key concepts prior to introducing new learning material at the beginning of the year or course

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<sup>18</sup> See Bain, Lintz, & Word (1989); Block & Burns (1976); Block, Efthim, & Burns (1989); Brophy (1986b); Dalton & Hannafin (1988); Dewalt & Rodwell (1988); Dillashaw & Okey (1983); Fuchs, Fuchs, & Tindal (1986); Guskey & Gates (1986); Levine (1985); Rosenshine (1995); and Rosenshine & Stevens (1986).

2. Providing regular, focused reviews of key concepts and skills throughout the school year to check on and strengthen student learning
3. Selecting computer-assisted instructional activities that include review and reteaching components
4. Using different materials and strategies for reteaching than those used for initial instruction, rather than merely providing a "rehash" of previously taught lessons
5. Developing reteaching approaches that capitalize on students' learning strengths as well as those that address their weaknesses
6. Continuing to reteach priority lesson content until students show that they have learned it

## **Conclusion**

Returning to the question posed in the introduction—What combination of schooling conditions and practices holds the greatest promise for improving student learning?—I believe we have some strong candidates for answers. The areas of practice identified here rest on considerable research weight, are entirely or partially school controllable, and most—though not all—can be implemented without significant new expenditures. We clearly owe it to educators and the public to share what we know about the relative effectiveness of possible arrangements and practices, and I trust that this paper helps to define and impart that knowledge.

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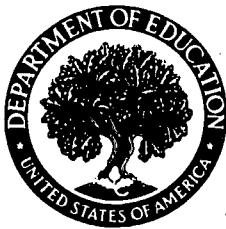


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